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Lent 2

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Cross to Life”

Text: Mark 8:31-39; Genesis 28:10-22; Romans 5:1-11

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

Jacob is sleeping on the ground with a rock under his head. Given his biography, one wonders which of the two was harder – Jacob’s head, or the pillow under it! *Why would God want anything to do with Jacob?* Jacob, only concerned for himself. Jacob, who took advantage of his brother Esau, buying his birthright as the first born in exchange for a bowl of stew. Jacob, who tricked his blind father into giving him the blessing that was rightfully his brother Esau’s. Jacob, who was now running away from this mess that he made, to live with some relatives until the smoke cleared. Why would God want anything to do with this deceiver?

And then there’s Peter, disagreeing with Jesus. It seems the only thing that goes in Peter’s mouth more often than food is his foot! *Why would God want anything to do with Peter?* Peter, who seems to like to open his mouth before he engages his mind. Peter, who wants to build three tents at Jesus’ transfiguration, who likes jumping out boats to walk on water, who just can’t seem to get it. Peter, who was soon to deny even knowing – or ever meeting! – Jesus, not once or twice, but three times. Why would God want anything to do with this hardhead?

Good questions. But here’s an even better one: *why would God want anything to do with you and me?* You and me who, truth be told, are Jacob and Peter all rolled into one! Or even worse. Cause we also got some “doubting Thomas” in us, don’t we? And then sprinkle in a little Judas, for when we betray Jesus and sell Him out. We got a whole lot of Adam! Who else you got in you? Maybe King David and his lust? Moses and his excuse making? Jeremiah and his self pity? Gideon and his “sheepishness?” Why would God want anything to do with us? With such hardheaded, doubting, denying, stubborn, cowardly, temper-filled, self-centered sinners like you and me?

Yet, He does! Jacob, Peter, and you and me. Not because of anything in us! Or anything

we do! *That's* clear! In fact, it is exactly what we do that should cause God to reject us! And yet He chooses us, and blesses us, and promises Himself to us. While we were helpless, powerless, and using whatever little strength we have *against* God, He comes to us and makes us His own. ***I am God, your God***, He says. ***I will be with you and keep you***, He says. All grace. All gift. Or as St. Paul would write: ***“While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”*** Ain't that the truth!

Now, that last thought should make you pause. It often *doesn't*, to our shame. We often take it for granted, I think. The cross. We hear of it so often. We see it so often. Do we think we know it? The words of Jesus in the Holy Gospel for today show that we don't. For what we heard there is that those whom God chooses in His wondrous, magnificent, mind-boggling grace, He chooses with a cross. ***“If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.”*** And isn't it at that point that we do the Jacob thing, and run away? The Peter thing, and object? The anti-Christ thing, and try to find a way – *any* way – except through the cross? Uh, thanks, but no thanks.

Because we all have an idea of what the Christian life should be like. For some it is to be victorious over the sin that plagues me. For others it is to set free from troubles and cares. For some it is to live in a state of holy bliss and perfection. For others it is to be successful and satisfied. And for still others, it is to be happy and joyful all the time. And there are lots more. And the common theme in all these pictures is that the cross is great . . . *as long as it is on Christ*. As long as it is on *Him*, and not on *me*.

But that is setting our minds squarely on the things **of man** and not the things **of God**. For all of those things are straight from the philosophy of the world. The world which teaches that luxury and ease are good, and suffering and hardship are bad. And so if something causes you to suffer, or causes you hardship, or holds you back, just get rid of it! And so if it's your marriage, get rid of it! Get a divorce. If it's your baby, get rid of it! Get an abortion. If it's an elderly parent, get rid of him! We'll call it mercy killing. Whatever it is, *don't be held back!* And in the name of these gods, these idols of success and convenience, of pleasure and ease, many have also gotten rid of Christ. For if God teaches differently than the way you want to live, *just get rid of Him*.

Us too? Oh, not intentionally! We would never do such a thing! But by trying to save our lives here and now, trying to be all that we can be, are we selling our souls to climb up the wrong ladder? The corporate ladder, the power ladder, the popularity ladder, the pleasure ladder, the wealth ladder, the praise ladder. These are powerful temptations – for Christians, for churches, for synods. We have a picture in our mind of what our life

should look like, and what our Christian life should look like. But in our efforts to achieve this self-imaged picture, are we saving our life, or losing it? Are we bowing our knees to the true God, or one of our own making? ***“What does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his life?”***

But there is another ladder. A ladder *God* set down into this crazy, mixed-up, hungry world. A way out. Jacob dreamed of it. Christ hung on it. The cross. It is the only way to life. *Real* life. God’s life. For the cross is how God gives life. His life. Eternal life. There is no other way. For the sin in us and in the world has so robbed us of life that the only way to live is to die! To die and start all over again. We can’t be fixed; we must be resurrected.

And so Jesus comes, to die and rise for us. To break this curse of sin. And He must, for He’s the only One who can. We can’t die and rise ourselves because when we die, that’s it! The end. Kaput. Nothing more. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust. . . . But when Jesus dies, it is different. When Jesus dies there isn’t just death, but life. When Jesus dies, dead people come out of their graves! (Mt 27:52) And then He comes out of His grave. **And so no longer does life die and death live! Through His death and resurrection, Jesus has put it right again! Life lives, and death dies!**

And this He wants for you and me. He doesn’t want your life to die and your death to live, and so Jesus gives to us His cross. Not just any cross, His cross. *Not to make us suffer, but to make us live.* To kill the old, sinful, idolatrous man in us all, and raise to life a new man. A new Jacob, a new Peter, and new you and me. Because God knows that left on our own, we quickly return to our own, old images of life, and the Christian life. The way *we* think things should be. And so He gives us His cross, that we may not live to die, but instead die to live. That things be the way *He* wants them to be!

And that’s why the only thing Satan fears in this world is the cross. He doesn’t fear you and me – he *toys* with you and me! If we think we can beat him at his own game, you are sadly mistaken. But he knows there is One he cannot defeat. He knew that the sacrifice of the perfect humanity of Jesus would satisfy the demands of the Law and reverse the curse. He knew that the blood and death of the Son of God would cover the world’s sin. He knew that his dirty little lie would be shoved into the pit of hell by Jesus’ ***“It is finished.”*** He knew that death and the grave could not contain the Body of Jesus. He knew that his accusing voice would be silenced, sin atoned for, death undone, and his kingdom vanquished. He knew it. But since he couldn’t stop Jesus from His cross and death and resurrection, he’s now come to mess with you. Get *you* to avoid the cross.

Throw it off. Chase your own dreams. Have life on your own terms.

But our Saviour will have none of it! And so just as He rebuked Peter with His “***Get behind me, Satan!***” so He still rebukes Satan today, here, on your behalf. In Baptism, in Absolution, in His Supper, Jesus is still putting Satan behind Him, driving Him out of his kingdom, crushing his head, forgiving our sins. Putting Himself and His life in us, and putting us in Himself. And laying his cross on us. Not to make us suffer, but that we may live. That we trust Him and not ourselves. That His cross be our cross, His life our life, His kingdom our kingdom. . . . And so Satan hates it when you trust Jesus and cling to His cross. He hates it when you bow your head, confess your sins, and open your mouths to receive the body and blood of Jesus. He hates it because he knows he’s lost. You’re not his. You belong to Life. You are justified, you are sanctified, you are glorified, in your Saviour. Chosen by Him. Given *His* life. All grace. All gift. Rescued from running the endless treadmill of this life and never getting anywhere, and joined to your Saviour in the life that has no end.

So take up the cross that Jesus has given you. Do not be afraid. Don’t run away, object, doubt, or deny. For if it is from Him, it is good. It may not be what we think, what we have pictured, what all those guys on TV are trying to sell us – *because it’s better than all of that!* Just ask Jacob and Peter. . . . *Dying to live.* It sounds funny. But it’s the way of the cross. The way of Jesus. The way of forgiveness and life. The way of grace. His way with you.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus our Lord unto everlasting life. Amen.